

Exploring the 'Feminization of Christianity': Secularization, Gender and Power Shifts in 19th Century Religious Dynamics

Claudia MATEI (VARGA)

PhD(c), "Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad, Romania, info.matei@icloud.com

ABSTRACT: The concept of gender has grown from a marginal concern to a pivotal element in historical research on Christianity, particularly through the lens of the 'feminization of Christianity' narrative. This term describes the nineteenth-century shift in religious life where women emerged as pivotal figures, amid a broader context where secularization was also taking place. The applicability of 'feminization' to Catholicism in Belgium is examined, considering Belgium's unique position between France's acceptance and Germany's resistance to the theory. While the paper explores variations, elements, and causes of 'feminization' from other studies, it does not conclude definitively due to the novelty of this thesis in Belgium, suggesting further research to address this gap.

KEYWORDS: the feminization of Christianity, secularization, gender and religion, Belgian Catholicism, historical research

Introduction

In recent decades, the significance of 'sex' or 'gender' for the power, impact, or even existence of Christianity has shifted in historical research from a barely examined factor to a crucial foundation for developing various theories (MacLeod 1988, 144). Emblematic of this focus is the dominant narrative of 'the feminization of Christianity'. This concept signifies a change in perspective within historical research and is often critiqued alongside 'container' concepts such as 'secularization' (Rotaru 2006, 251-266). Debates suggest the need for a clear definition of 'feminization' across different national contexts and denominations. This paper concentrates on Belgium, intriguingly situated between France, where the feminization of Christianity is generally accepted, and Germany, which has shown considerable resistance to the theory. It seeks to ascertain whether theories of 'feminization' applicable in other studies are also relevant to Catholicism in Belgium, questioning whether 'feminization' is a factor or if male involvement was so pronounced that the existence of 'feminization' or its aspects in Belgium can be altogether questioned. Given the novelty of this thesis in the Belgian context, no definitive conclusion is reached, but suggestions for future research to address these gaps are provided.

The 19th century transitioned from a secular era to one characterized by a flourishing religious life, with women as its main pillars. However, the secularization thesis was not entirely set aside, and 'the feminization of Christianity' was seen as an aspect of 'secularization', complementing this thesis. The argument posits that, although men were enticed by 'secularization', Christian culture did not vanish entirely as women ensured its ongoing existence and development (Rotaru 2023, 62-79). Opinions on whether this development is positive, or negative vary. Some views associate it with Christianity's decline and reduced influence in public affairs, echoing complaints from 19th century

contemporaries. Susan Juster, however, regards it as 'more a convenient fiction than historical reality'. Other interpretations are more positive, linking the 19th-century renaissance of Christianity (ultramontanism, pietism) to this 'feminization' (Juster 1997, 334). At the same time, an increasing number of critical voices reject the notion that this responsibility is borne by one gender alone (Meiwes 2000, 19).

Exploring the Interplay of Gender and Religion: The Shift in Identity and the "Feminization of Christianity"

Gender and religion are key elements of identity, both being in constant change and reciprocally influencing the formation of masculine and feminine identities (Blaschke 2000, 39, 47). It is emphasized that religion cannot be fully understood without considering the gender dimension. In 1998, Geert Hofstede published "Masculinity and Femininity. The Taboo Dimension of National Cultures", aiming to challenge Western thinking through gender theory and comparative international research, indicating that the ratio of masculinity to femininity is crucial in the study of secularization, affecting more the subjective side of religiosity than institutionalized religious practices (Hofstede & Verweij 1998, 187). The article focuses on the need to define the concept of "feminization of Christianity", which includes four notions varying by confession and geography.

Defining 'Feminisation': 'Feminisation' of Religious Personnel

The concept of "feminization" in a religious context can be defined as the numerical dominance of women in places of worship and across the religious field. This encompasses both professional clergy and laypeople. An indicator of the "feminization" of religious personnel is the notable success of female congregations and communities, as well as the expansion of their activities into areas such as hospitals, youth homes, and maternity wards (Abrams 2002, 35; Pasture 2012, 135). Schneider (2002, 126-129) noted that ecclesiastical charity wore a "female face," while McLeod (2000, 137-138) has dubbed the 19th century as "the century of the nun." Norbert Busch offers a different interpretation of "clergy feminization," using the term to refer to the "feminine characteristics" displayed by the 19th century German Catholic clergy in its daily routines, marking the disappearance of beards, the habit becoming regular attire, and the clergy's cessation of frequenting inns, which were typical gathering places for men (Busch 1995, 214). From the 19th century, female religious congregations in Belgium saw significant growth, reversing the previous male dominance in religious orders. By 1900, there were four times as many female as male clergymen (Tihon 1976, 122-123), a shift partly attributed to the roles women played in education and healthcare. Despite a notable number of men joining religious orders between 1884 and 1903, the rise in female congregations contributed majorly to the overall growth of the religious sector (Art 1979, 296-300). This increase was supported by societal preference for congregations engaged in practical services over contemplative ones (Maesschalk 2004, 151). The expansion of primary education in the 19th century further facilitated these activities, with many women in religious orders contributing to the feminization of the teaching profession (Depaepe 2004, 980-981).

In Belgium, the increase in female religious personnel, a trend evident since 1976, is undeniable. Tihon, building on Claude Langlois' research in France, labeled this trend as "une féminisation," highlighting the significant growth of female over male clergymen. Despite noting the challenge in linking the rise of female congregations to the dynamism of 19th century religious life, the text agrees with the feminization thesis (Tihon 1976, 122-123). It suggests that the shifts in gender ratios among religious personnel in Belgium signify a broader societal evolution.

Feminization in the Church: The Role and Impact of Women in Religious Life in Belgium

Beyond the 'feminization' in religious contexts that transcends the realm of professional clergy to encompass the lay faithful, it is predominantly women who have become increasingly active in church affairs and religious life across various denominations. It highlights how women have taken on significant roles in church-related volunteer work, missions, Sunday schools, and charitable activities within both Protestant and Catholic traditions (Schneider 2002, 132). Bock (2002, 114) notes that religion was "feminized" across many countries, with women mobilizing in various religious movements and activities, including pilgrimages, joining confraternities, and fulfilling confession obligations predominantly observed in Catholic practices.

Curtis (2002, 122) points out that historical research has paid more attention to the expansion of female religious orders than to the broader feminization of the faithful. She criticizes the reliance on certain ecclesiastical documents, like decanal visitation reports and annual Easter reports, for measuring religiosity, arguing that such sources reproduce a narrow ecclesiastical definition of religion focused solely on behavioral observance, thus neglecting the significance of these behaviors for different societal groups and individuals (Art 1988, 175). The text further explores how, from the 19th century, the failure to attend mass on Sundays was increasingly seen as a problem by the Church, with men being the majority of those absent. Studies from the dioceses of Ghent and Bruges indicate higher Sunday mass attendance (Rombouts 1985, 450) and religious observance among women, including the practices of annual confession and communion, which were particularly observed by women (Verbeke 1988, 241). With the Church's push for more frequent communion and confession in the early 20th century, these practices became predominantly upheld by women, posing a challenge to Belgian clergymen (Verbeke 1988, 242-243). Efforts were made to encourage male participation in religious practices, but the discrepancy in religious observance between men and women, underscored by comparable gender ratios in the general population, highlighted a significant gender gap in religious engagement (Rombouts 1971, 99).

In the analysis of modern religiosity, it is crucial to consider the phenomena of pilgrimage and pious fraternities, which, though long-standing, gained significant popularity in the middle of the 19th century (Lehoucq 1989, 260-264). The Church recognized these expressions of popular religious culture as means to attract the masses, attempting to institutionalize them as much as possible. The official recognition of intense devotion to the Virgin Mary, through her apparitions at La Salette and Lourdes, and the dogma of the Immaculate Conception highlight this effort. In Belgium, Marian pilgrimages saw tremendous success, revealing a quantitative feminization of Catholicism, with women constituting the majority of pilgrims (Therry 1982, 93-95). Fraternities dedicated to the Mother Mary, initiated in the 17th century, became efficient organizations for the faithful, surpassing the strict duties of religious practice. These fraternities contributed to the beautification of ceremonies and performed acts of charity, with a majority of members being women. However, the crucial role of men in fraternities in the 18th century evolved, with women taking on various initiatives from the 19th century onwards (Cloet 1984, 236-238). The analysis of Catholic volunteer work in Belgium reveals significant differences between the contributions of men and women. Men focused on establishing patronages and assuming political roles, fighting for a preferential position of the Church in society and cooperation between Church and State (De Maeyer 2001, 191-192). On the other hand, Catholic women addressed society's needs through philanthropic and charitable works, considering these activities as extensions of their domestic tasks. This marked difference in Catholic volunteer activities underscores an opposition between man and woman stemming from the acceptance or rejection of external authority (De Maeyer 2001, 119).

Feminization of 19th Century Religious Devotion: Shifts in Theology and Iconography

The concept of 'feminization' in religious contexts, beyond mere quantitative dominance, involves a shift towards a more 'soft' religious content and 'sentimentalization' of 19th-century devotion forms. This notion is characterized by the transition from the image of a vengeful, stern God to a loving deity, a change sometimes described metaphorically as God becoming female (Giorgio 1991, 172, 186). In Catholicism, this shift is highlighted by the emotional and sentimental elements of 19th-century ultramontanism, paralleling a similar movement in Protestantism from Calvinist rigor to anti-intellectual sentimentalism (Ford 1993, 167-168). The transformation in the representation of Jesus and the enhanced focus on Mary during the 19th century are cited as evidence of this 'feminization'. Jesus's portrayal with traditionally female attributes, such as long hair and a passive stance, and the significant devotion to Mary, leading to the term 'Century of Mary', signify a broader androgynisation and feminization of religious imagery. This includes the increased popularity of female saints and the prevalence of female figures in religious art (Juster 1997, 345-346).

For Belgium, the content and icons of Mary and Christ devotions serve as primary indicators of theological 'feminization'. The 1854 dogma of the Immaculate Conception elevated Mary as a figure free from original sin (Perquy 2005, 78), embodying purity and piety, aligning with societal sensibilities towards hyper-feminization. Post-WWI, the devotion to the Sacred Heart, linking Jesus and Mary, evolved to incorporate patriotic themes, reflecting a shift from a focus on suffering to a more socially aware spirituality (Perquy 2005, 79-80).

These changes are significant for historical research, illustrating the substantial role of devotions in 19th-century religious life and their reflection of societal shifts towards femininity and sentimentality (Marx 2005, 111). Devotional images, particularly of the Holy Family and the child Jesus, propagated models of family life, obedience, and devotion, appealing especially to girls and embodying a softening theology through iconographic representation (Pirotte 1991, 38). This shift towards a more accessible and tender portrayal of divine figures marks a departure from their previous inaccessibility, with much of this sentimentality and iconography being influenced by French religious discourse (Nissen 1995, 147-148).

Defining 'Feminisation': Discursive Shifts in 19th Century Christianity

The concept of 'feminization' within Christianity in the 19th century signifies a shift towards associating piety intrinsically with femininity, leading to societal re-evaluations and a 'sacralization' of women. This transformation is marked by the transition from viewing women as seductresses to perceiving them as embodiments of piety and virtue (Schneider 2002, 133; Ford 1993, 167, 169). In this period, women, now seen as the moral heart of the family, assumed roles that contrasted sharply with medieval portrayals of masculinity as the core of piety (Olenhusen 1995, 11-12).

The Catholic Church in Belgium played a significant role in this shift by involving women in its secular dialogue, emphasizing the importance of Christian education (Rotaru 2021, 87-92) and spirituality within the family (Juster 1997, 345). Bishops saw women, particularly mothers, as crucial in transmitting religious customs and values (Westerkamp 1999, 133-134). This vision contributed to both the 'sacralization' of women and an increase in women's self-confidence, positioning women as discreet, self-sacrificing, and modest figures central to family and religious education (Simonton 2006, 206).

This discursive feminisation is also reflected in Belgian realist and impressionist art of the 19th and 20th centuries, where expressions of popular piety often featured women

and children in domestic and outdoor religious activities, such as pilgrimages and processions (Schoonbaert 1986, 20,102,108, 109, 112, 113, 131, 141, 145, 146). These artistic depictions, while not direct proof of historical realities, indicate a prevalent discourse that linked piety with femininity (Simonton 2006, 252).

Moreover, the association of women with piety had implications beyond Christian circles, influencing socialist and liberal views on women's roles in politics and education (McLeod 2000, 134). Socialists resisted granting women voting rights due to fears of clerical influence, while liberals sought to distance women's education from the Church's influence, aiming for emancipation from prejudice and superstition (Schneider 2002, 142). This dialogue reflects broader societal concerns about women's religiosity and its implications for education and political participation (Anderson 1995, 654).

Chronology and Sexual Dimorphism: Key Aspects of the Feminization Thesis in Religious

'Sexual Dimorphism'?

In the landscape of religious engagement, a notable gender divide is observed, where women are more actively involved than men across various Christian denominations in both Europe and North America. This gender disparity, termed "sexual dimorphism," highlights women's crucial roles in leading religious revivals and movements. Despite their significant contributions, women often find themselves marginalized within the formal hierarchies of religious institutions (McLeod 1988, 8,144). The article also points to geographical differences in the religious disengagement of men, indicating a broader cultural and societal impact on religious practices (McLeod 2000, 125-127).

Setting the Historical Stage: Chronology of 'Feminisation'

The historical examination of religious feminization reveals a complex interplay between societal, political, and economic factors, pinpointing the 19th century as a pivotal era, although its roots can be traced back to the 17th and 18th centuries (Bederman 1989, 432-465). The French and American Revolutions emerge as significant milestones, accelerating the process of feminization within Christianity. This shift towards female dominance in religious practices was shaped by various historical contexts, reflecting the evolving roles of women in religious spheres across Europe and North America (Curtis 2000, 124).

Polarising 'Men' and 'Women'

The feminization of Christianity, largely recognized in the 19th century, was influenced by the emergence of distinct gender roles and identities. This period saw the development of the two-sexes theory, attributing specific natural and cultural characteristics to women and men, respectively (Busch 1995, 208). Piety became seen as inherently feminine, with irreligiousness paralleled to masculinity. These perceptions were reflected in societal norms, legal frameworks, and religious expectations across Europe and America, reinforcing traditional gender roles and the association of women with natural piety (Hagemann 2004, 122-127).

'Separate Spheres'?

The 19th century saw a polarisation of gender roles, contributing to the 'feminization of Christianity'. This period embraced the 'separate spheres' ideology, dividing male and female roles into public and private domains, respectively (Ford 1993, 173). Industrialization and societal changes reinforced this division, assigning women the responsibility for religion and family (Busch 1995, 207). Despite the notion of separate

spheres, the influence of Christianity and women's roles in it continued to intersect significantly with public life, challenging the notion of strictly divided gender roles in religious contexts (Olenhusen 1995, 27-28, 34-36; Horne 2004, 22-40).

"Feminization of Christianity: Exploring Trends and Shifts in the 20th Century"

The phenomenon of the 'feminization of Christianity' has been attributed to various factors including the polarisation of gender characteristics, the concept of separate spheres, and the French and American Revolutions. However, there is less research on whether this feminization continued into the 20th century and what factors may have influenced its decline (Hagemann 2004, 243). Some scholars suggest that the gender gap between men and women widened by the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century in several countries. Others point to events like World War I as turning points, where the feminine character of certain religious traditions was overshadowed by nationalistic fervor (Walter and Davie 1998, 640-660).

Research on the British case suggests that by the 1960s, changes in moral values led to a decrease in the prominence of gender imbalances within Christianity (Brown 2006, 14, 30-31). However, despite these shifts, the gender gap remains a significant aspect of religious practice and belief in Western societies influenced by Christianity, with women generally exhibiting higher levels of religiosity compared to men according to various studies (Walter and Davie 1998, 642).

Unveiling the 'Femina Religiosa': Insights into Christian Feminization

Research on the 'feminization of Christianity' marks a shift towards understanding women's roles within religious contexts, prompted by the emergence of women's studies. However, there remains a tendency to focus solely on women, neglecting men's experiences. Caroline Ford highlights diverse archetypes of Christian women in the 19th century, while distinct ideals of masculinity also existed within Catholicism (Heller 2004, 610, 612). Despite primarily studying women, there is a need to explain why men show higher religious 'infidelity' and why women maintain and reinforce their religious practices. Explanations often revolve around societal perceptions of women as the 'weaker sex' but also consider motivations like self-confirmation and socialization (Ford 1993, 167).

"Self-Realization: A Driving Force in Women's Attraction to Religion"

Women's attraction to religion in the 19th century stemmed from its potential for self-realization, as seen in both Catholicism and Protestantism. The concept of the 'sacralization of woman' strengthened women's faith in their abilities and contributed to the appeal of Christianity (Blackbourn 1991, 786). This could manifest in active involvement in charity or in passive roles reflecting Christ's sacrifice. Participation in religious rituals allowed women to assert their piety, gaining respect and access to public circles. The rise of European Catholic congregations during this period highlighted the growth potential for women in active religious life, offering them control and authority (Liogier 2016, 204-205). French female Catholic congregations, in particular, provided varied job opportunities and responsibilities, contributing to their success. Similarly, German congregations appealed to women for their involvement in the Christian society project (Langlois 1984, 48-49). Anglican and Protestant deaconesses emerged to meet the need for total involvement among women, though they lacked access to pastoral ministry. Catholic sisters enjoyed more autonomy compared to Protestant deaconesses due to their ability to elect their Mother Superior (Bock 2002, 114).

Empowering Women: Religious Engagement in 19th Century Europe

Research into 19th century French and German Catholic women highlights their limited opportunities for socialization, independent action, and public power compared to men. The Church and its associated organizations provided one of the few outlets for social interaction beyond the household, contributing to their success. However, it is crucial to note the influence of the male hierarchy in guiding and leading women's activities, suggesting a relative degree of "feminization" rather than complete independence (Brown 2006, 59). Similarly, Protestant women also found appeal in religion as a means for independent action and socialization. Religion offered opportunities for personal growth, leadership, and adventure, beyond purely spiritual refreshment (Curtis 2002, 156).

Crafting Feminine Appeal: Clerical Strategies in Religious Engagement

Pat Starkey's analysis delves into the activities of women within both Protestant and Catholic domains, revealing a dual tendency. The first trend suggests that female congregations served as platforms for women to establish their presence in public spheres (Starkey's 2006, 206). Conversely, the second tendency underscores the restrictive nature of clerical oversight, portraying the support offered by the Church (Rotaru 2017, 57-76) as contingent upon compliance with its regulations, potentially stifling discussions on female emancipation. This dynamic is often interpreted as a deliberate strategy by the clergy, particularly evident in the qualitative feminization of content, predominantly within Catholicism (Starkey's 2006, 193, 194).

Here, the reevaluation of women's roles and the emphasis on themes appealing to them were strategic efforts to prevent their disengagement from religious institutions. For instance, the proclamation of the Immaculate Conception doctrine aimed to retain women's allegiance by highlighting their pivotal role as mothers in perpetuating Catholicism (De Maeyer 2001, 41-42; 119). However, Schneider (2002, 145-146) contests the notion of these content shifts as calculated manipulations, arguing that bishops remained committed to the traditional patriarchal model and did not relinquish control over religious education to women entirely.

Navigating Faith: Belgian Women's Religious Engagement

In 19th century Belgium, women's involvement with the Catholic Church and its affiliated organizations represented a fertile ground for self-realization and, to some extent, emancipation, despite the constraints of a predominantly patriarchal society (De Maeyer 2001, 111). This participation was not merely a means for women to assert themselves within the strict confines of traditional roles but also provided a platform for the subtle undermining of patriarchy, giving women an active voice and role in society, even in a context where power and authority were predominantly male (Reed 1988, 199-238). While involvement in philanthropic and educational activities was seen as a path to self-fulfillment and brought a certain degree of emancipation, it still operated within socially acceptable limits, in some cases perpetuating traditional gender norms (Loontjes 1951, 210).

Interestingly, despite these limitations, women managed to use the ecclesiastical structure as a vehicle for extending their influence beyond the domestic sphere, highlighting a balance between conforming to society-imposed roles and the desire to transcend them. Additionally, women's participation in religious congregations offered alternatives to traditional family life, paving the way for forms of independence and social recognition in a context that would otherwise confine them to the private sphere (Wynants 1989, 146).

Conclusions

In conclusions, the trajectory of women within the Catholic Church in 19th century Belgium illustrates the complexity of their social position, navigating between gender constraints and the search for spaces for self-expression and social action. This endeavor reflects a delicate dance between accepting and challenging patriarchal norms, underlining the complex dynamics of female emancipation within a given religious and social context.

Drawing upon the discussions presented in this article, it is clear that the feminization thesis offers a critical departure from the androcentric lens that has long dominated Christian historical studies. It serves as a corrective measure, attempting to balance the scales by bringing women's religious experiences to the forefront. However, this reorientation comes with its own set of challenges (Rotaru 2016, 29-43). The potential risk of swinging the pendulum too far, focusing solely on women and femininity, must be acknowledged and consciously avoided to prevent a new gendered imbalance.

The Belgian case, with its unique pillarized social structure, provides a fertile ground for both quantitative and qualitative analysis, presenting clear evidence of feminization within religious institutions. However, the research often stops short of a deep dive into the qualitative nuances of gender differentiation in religious identity. A more granular examination is necessary to elucidate the intricate dynamics of how men and women navigate and shape their religious spaces.

As the article comes to a close, the imperative is clear: we must forge a path forward that allows for a comprehensive exploration of both male and female religious lives. The feminization thesis should not become a catch-all category, but rather a finely pointed tool for dissecting and understanding the complex interplay of gender within the fabric of Christian history. This approach will not only refine the concept of feminization within religious studies but will also enhance our broader understanding of gender roles within the historical narrative.

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